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Robert Drews

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Article

Judaean *Christiani* in the Middle Decades of the First Century

Robert Drews
Vanderbilt University, USA
robert.drews@vanderbilt.edu

Abstract

The *Chrestiani* (or *Christiani*) who, according to Tacitus, were executed by Nero for setting the fire of 64 CE were very likely apocalyptic and nationalist Judaeans rather than the New Covenant people greeted by Paul at Romans 16. For many observant Judaeans hoping for the liberation of Judaea from the Roman Empire, the title *Christos* (Messiah) was especially a reference to Jesus *Nazoraios*. Latin-speakers evidently coined the label *Christiani* for the boldest and loudest of these Judaean believers in the ascended *Christos*. Fervour for the expected return of *Christos* from heaven was intense among Judaeans in the 60s, contributing to the revolt of 66–70.

Keywords: origin of the *Christiani* name; apocalyptic prophecy; burning of Rome; Josephus; Judaean revolt of 66–70; Son of Man; Suetonius; Tacitus

* Minor textual corrections were made to this article after its initial publication.

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A deliberately provocative article by Brent Shaw has kindled a debate about Tacitus's account that Nero, in order to deflect rumours that he had caused the fire that destroyed much of Rome in 64 CE, savagely executed *Chrestiani* on that charge.[1] One of Shaw's central arguments for labelling the execution as a "myth" is that in the 60s the term *Chrestiani*, or *Christiani* (the "corrected" reading of the M. II manuscript of Tacitus's *Annales* 15.44)[2] was not yet in use. Therefore, Tacitus's statement that the Roman *vulgus* called the people who were executed *Chrestiani* "is a manifest anachronism."[3]

An important aspect of this debate is the identity, in the middle decades of the first century, of *Chrestiani*, or *Christiani.* Both Shaw and his critics understand *Chrestiani* to refer to the kind of New Covenant converts whom we meet in Paul's letters, in Acts, and in second-century texts.[4] Such converts, it can be agreed, did not apply the term *Christiani* to themselves until—at the earliest—the beginning of the second century. I am quite sure, however, that the name *Christiani* was not coined for "Christians." Well before New Covenant converts accepted it, the name *Christiani* (or *Chrestiani*) must have been coined by Latin-speakers for fully observant but apocalyptic Judaeans in the diaspora who proclaimed, perhaps in a loud and offensive manner, that Messiah (*Christos*) was about to return from heaven and put an end to the Roman Empire. The name *Christiani* (or *Chrestiani*), that is, decades before it denoted New Covenant "Christians," must have been applied to Judaeans who were steeped in the apocalyptic

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1 Brent Shaw, "The Myth of the Neronian Persecution," *Journal of Roman Studies* 105 (2015): 73–100; Christopher Jones, "The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution: A Response to Brent Shaw," *New Testament Studies* 63 (2017): 146–52; Birgit Van der Lans and Jan Bremmer, "Tacitus and the Persecution of the Christians: An Invention of Tradition?" *Eirene: Studia Graeca et Latina* 53 (2017): 299–321; Brent Shaw, "Response to Christopher Jones: The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution," *New Testament Studies* 64 (2018): 231–42; John G. Cook, "*Chrestiani, Christiani, Χριστιανοί*: A Second-Century Anachronism?" *Vigiliae Christianae* 74 (2020): 237–44; Mischa Meier, *Die neronische Christenverfolgung und ihre Kontexte* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2021); Christopher Hansen, "The Problem of *Annals* 15.44: On the Plinian Origin of Tacitus's Information on Christians," *Journal of Early Christian History* 13 (2023): 62–80.

2 Cook, "*Chrestiani*," Fig. 1 provides a fine colour illustration of the Medicean manuscript, showing an erasure of the original scribe's *e* and the substitution of an *i*. The original scribe consistently wrote *ri* with a ligature, but in the name *Christianos* the letters are separated. In the following sentence the original scribe wrote the "name" *Christus* with a ligature. Did Tacitus know that the name should be *Christiani*, but also know that in Nero's time the Roman *vulgus* pronounced it, incorrectly, as *Chrestiani*?

3 Shaw, "Myth," 87: "The tendency to bring the description up to date surely includes another obvious item. Tacitus knows to call the people Christians. It is a manifest anachronism. It is difficult to know when the Christians were first called Christians, when they began calling themselves Christians or, much more important for our purposes, when Roman figures of authority like governors and emperors identified them as such. … We do know that up to the end of the apostle Paul's life, approximately to the mid-60s, the term was not used."

4 Although, for example, Mischa Meier concludes that people of the New Covenant were indeed executed by Nero, he agrees with Shaw that it was "anachronistisch" for Tacitus to state that in Nero's time the adherents of the new *exitiabilis superstitio* were called *Christiani* by the Roman *vulgus*. See Meier, *Die neronische Christenverfolgung*, 22–23.

literature of the Hellenistic period and who shouted (loudly enough to be heard by Latin-speakers in Rome or other cities of the diaspora) the title *Christos*, very likely in the expectation that Messiah would soon return from heaven and establish a permanent and world-wide Judaean kingdom. These would have been the *Christiani* whom Nero executed for the burning of Rome. According to Tacitus (*Annales* 15.44), to squelch the rumours that he had himself ordered the fire, Nero devised the most extreme punishments (some were crucified, others were burned to death) for the execution of people whom the Roman commoners called *Chrestiani* and whom they disliked because of their bad behaviour (*quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Chrestianos appellabat*). Evidently these original *Christiani*, or *Chrestiani*, were not ready to follow Paul's instructions at Romans 13:1–6, nor were they likely to have included many of the more than 30 individuals whom Paul greets in Romans 16.[5]

Since Latin-speakers gave to them the exonym *Christiani*, it will be helpful to look once again at an occasion when Latin-speakers had an incentive for doing so. Such an occasion, during the principate of Claudius (41–54 CE), is well known and has been frequently discussed.[6] But its implications have not, I think, been sufficiently explored.

In his account of Claudius's rule the biographer Suetonius reports (*Divus Claudius* 25.4) that the emperor expelled from Rome Judaeans who, stirred up by Chrestus, were continually raising tumults (*Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*). Suetonius's sentence has often been compared to Acts 18:2–3, where we read that Priscilla and Aquila had left Italy for Corinth after Claudius expelled "all the Judaeans" (πάντας τοὺς Ἰουδαίους) from Rome.

Did Claudius expel all Judaeans from Rome? Because proselytism to Judaism was frequent, the Roman government had from time to time issued orders for all Judaeans to leave Rome. Something like this seems to have happened in 139 BCE, according to an epitome of the slovenly *Facta et dicta memorabilia* written by Valerius Maximus: In the consulship of M. Popilius Laenas and L. Calpurnius (139 BCE) the peregrine praetor evicted the Judaeans from Rome (or from Italy) because they were trying to convert

5 Of the dozens of people greeted or mentioned there, apparently most were not even Judaeans. Paul refers only to a couple, Andronicus and Junia, and to Herodian as συγγενεῖς μου, and Priscilla and Aquila are elsewhere identified as Judaeans. On these five see Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, "Juden in Rom unter Nero: Intellektuelle Netzwerke, religiose Praxis, geistige Horizonte," in *Tempel, Lehrhaus, Synagoge: Orte jüdischen Gottesdienstes, Lernens and Lebens*, *Festschrift für Wolfgang Kraus*, ed. Christian Eberhart, Martin Karrer , Siegfried Kreuzer , and Martin Meiser (Leiden: Brill [Schöningh], 2020), 291–92.

6 See, for example, the extensive bibliography at Dixon Slingerland, "Suetonius 'Claudius' 25.4 and the Account in Cassius Dio," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 79 (1989): note 4. More recent discussions include Willem J. C. Blom, "Why the Testimonium Taciteum is Authentic: A Response to Carrier," *Vigiliae Christianae* 73 (2019): 565–70. Blom's article argues against Richard Carrier, "The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014): 264–83.

Romans to their cult of Jupiter Sabazius.[7] Again in 19 CE, according to better sources (Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius), the emperor Tiberius had a *senatus consultum* passed that conscripted 4 000 Judaeans of military age, all from the freedman class, for military service in Sardinia, and ordered that all other Judaeans should not only leave Rome but leave Italy.[8] According to Josephus (who was loathe to admit that the Roman government was traditionally wary of Judaism), the reason for the order that all Judaeans should leave Rome was that a woman named Fulvia, evidently of the senatorial class, had converted to Judaism and had then been bilked of much purple and gold by four Judaean rascals on the pretext that they would deliver the items to the Jerusalem temple. Although something like the swindle reported by Josephus may have happened, Tiberius and the senate would probably have had broader reasons for the *senatus consultum*, such as the relative ease with which upper-class Roman women could proselytise to Judaism.

However that may be, although ordering all Judaeans to leave Rome was not difficult, enforcement of the order certainly was, as Erich Gruen has convincingly argued.[9] After any such order most Judaeans seem to have stayed where they were. How many Judaeans lived in Rome in the early first century? Not nearly so many as in Alexandria, but nevertheless quite a few, mostly in the Trastevere district north of the Tiber. An approximate number is difficult to determine. As Leonard Rutgers remarked, "A comparison of the suggestions made for the total number of Jews living in the city of Rome in the early Principate may serve to illustrate our problem. Some scholars propose that the Roman Jewish community consisted of 15,000 souls, while others, using exactly the same literary evidence, suggest a figure of 40,000; still others hold that 60,000 is the most likely figure."[10]

In any case, in Claudius's Rome the Judaean population—both native Judaeans and proselytes—numbered many thousands and a total expulsion would have been difficult if not impossible to enforce. The third-century historian Dio Cassius was quite sure that Claudius did not expel "all the Judaeans" from Rome. This historian opens his account of Claudius's reign with a summary of how that emperor's useful actions contrasted with those of his predecessor, Caligula, and Dio Cassius's account seems to date these

7 Julius Paris's *Valeri Maximi Factorum et dictorum memorabilium epitome* 1.3.3: Iudaeos, qui Sabazi Iovis cultu Romanos inficere mores conati erant, repetere domos suas coegit. On this puzzling episode see E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule from Pompey to Diocletian: A Study in Political Relations* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 128–29.

8 Tacitus, *Annales* 2.85; Josephus *A.J.* 18.81–84; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 36.1.

9 See Erich Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 18, on the expulsion orders: "Posturing rather than pragmatism took precedence."

10 Leonard Rutgers, "Attitudes to Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period: Reflections on Feldman's 'Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World,'" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 85 (1995): 365.

actions of Claudius to the beginning of his reign: in the year 41.[11] Among these was an order that the Judaeans stop their congregational meetings:

> As for the Jews, who had again increased so greatly that by reason of their multitude it would have been hard without raising a tumult to bar them from the city, he did not drive them out, but ordered them, while continuing their traditional mode of life, not to hold meetings.[12]

The account by Dio Cassius, obviously, contradicts Acts 18:2–3, and is probably right. At least it does not seem that the Judaean population in Rome was significantly reduced by Claudius's action.[13] Evidently, however, in 41 or a later year in Claudius's principate something disturbing was happening during or after the congregational meetings, and Claudius ordered the meetings to stop.

Nevertheless, Claudius clearly did order the expulsion of some Judaeans from Rome. The conflict between the accounts of Suetonius and Dio Cassius is resolved if we translate the Suetonian sentence with a restrictive clause, rather than with a non-restrictive clause: "He expelled from Rome the Judaeans who, at the instigation of Chrestus, were constantly raising a tumult." In other words, the attempted expulsion (probably not very successful) was aimed at some Judaeans, and perhaps not very many Judaeans, who were causing a tumult instigated by "Chrestus." Although Suetonius was evidently under the impression that "Chrestus" was leading these troublesome Judaeans, it is much more likely that what the Romans in Claudius's time thought they heard as the far more familiar *Chrestus* was in fact Χριστός.[14] And that Suetonius's *Chrestus* is in fact an unwitting reflection of the reported resurrection and ascension of Jesus *Nazoraios*.[15] Most scholars have agreed that this is so, but suppose that New Covenant

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11 Slingerland, "Suetonius 'Claudius' 25.4," 307, observed that most scholars, including Eduard Meyer, F. F. Bruce, and Arnaldo Momigliano have concluded that the Dio Cassius evidence dates the action to 41. See also the same article, 316: "In 41 CE, at the beginning of his reign, Claudius took action against the Jewish population in Rome."

12 Dio Cassius 60.6.6 (Earnest Cary trans. [Loeb, 1924]).

13 On Judaeans in Rome during Nero's principate see Niebuhr, "Juden in Rom unter Nero." See also Gruen, *Diaspora*, 53, for the "stable existence" that Judaeans in Rome experienced until the outbreak of the Judaean revolt in 66.

14 Most Romans would have supposed that the Judaeans were shouting *Chrestos* rather than *Christos* (some Latin-speakers would have known the adjective χρηστός as a proper name, but even Greek-speakers would have been puzzled by χριστός, "rubbed on, anointed"). Because Latin-speakers, including Tacitus and Suetonius, did not know that *Christos* was the Greek equivalent of "Messiah," they assumed that *Christos* (or *Chrestos*) was the name of the man whom Judaeans were hailing.

15 Blom, "Testimonium Taciteum," holds the generally accepted view: that the *Chrestus* in Suetonius's sentence is a reflection of Jesus *Nazoraios.* Carrier, "Christian Interpolation," had argued that it is not. For another rejection of the generally accepted view see Gruen, *Diaspora*, 39: "Chrestus can hardly be Jesus Christ, since the text clearly implies his presence in Rome at the time." Dixon Slingerland, *Claudian Policymaking and the Early Imperial Repression of Judaism at Rome* (Atlanta: Scholars' Press, 1997), proposed that "Chrestus" was an otherwise unattested freedman employed by Claudius, and that the *impulsore Chresto* should mean that the freedman Chrestus persuaded

or "Christian" missionaries, predecessors of Paul, had begun arriving in Rome and were arousing loud and disorderly opposition from observant Judaeans.[16]

Peter Lampe, for example, opened a short and useful article thus:

> In den 40er Jahren des ersten Jahrhunderts fasste in Rom das Christentum zuerst in einer oder mehreren Synagogen Fuß. Die christliche Botschaft entfachte Unruhe unter den stadtrömischen Juden, bis Claudius die herausragenden Köpfe dieser innerjüdischen Auseinandersetzung der Stadt verwies.[17]

The Suetonian sentence, however, does not suggest that the disorderly commotion came from Judaean opposition to a "Christian" message, nor is that what the Latin name *Christiani* (or *Chrestiani*) tells us. The tumult was coming, both the sentence and the name indicate, from Judaeans who were instigated, or impelled, by *Chrestus.* Although this does not fit well within the histories that have been written of either Judaism or Christianity, I think we must conclude that in Claudius's principate, and probably at the beginning of his principate, some Judaeans in Rome were loudly acclaiming as Χριστός—Messiah—Jesus *Nazoraios*: the Galilean whom Pontius Pilatus had crucified as "king of the Judaeans" and who was believed to have arisen from the dead and to have ascended into Heaven. By the 40s that narrative would surely have been familiar to many Judeans who lived in Rome but had travelled to Jerusalem for one or more of the three annual pilgrim feasts.

Because some Judaeans must have shouted the title *Christos* often and loud enough to be heard by Latin-speakers, it is likely that the Roman *vulgus* would have referred to those who did so as *Christiani,* or *Chrestiani*. The name, analogous to the names *Pompeiani* and *Caesariani* for partisans of Pompeius and Caesar, would have been something like "partisans of *Christos*" and had political overtones.[18] Already in the 40s,

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Claudius to expel the uproarious Judaeans. Slingerland's proposal must be rejected. The Latin phrase *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis* can hardly be construed as anything but "Judaeans who at the instigation of Chrestus were continually raising an uproar."

16 For example, Smallwood, *Jews under Roman Rule*, 211, concluded that "the only reasonable interpretation of Suetonius's sentence is that the reference is to Christianity," and she supposed that the coming of New Covenant missionaries to the Judaean community in Rome aroused "opposition and uproar" (212). Likewise, Blom, "Testimonium Taciteum," 569, believes that the tumults occurred because "it is very plausible that there were Christians in Rome," and cites Priscilla and Aquila as examples. Suetonius's sentence, however, indicates that the uproar was coming not from Judaeans who objected to "Christian" ideas, but from those Judaeans who were exclaiming *Christos*, "Messiah."

17 Peter Lampe, "Urchristliche Missionswege nach Rom: Haushalte paganer Herrschaft als jüdisch-christliche Keimzellen," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 (2001): 123.

18 *Chrestiani* is what the *vulgus* called the "partisans of Christus," whom Tacitus took the trouble to find out had been executed by Pontius Pilatus: *auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat.* In the Medicean II manuscript the "name"

that is, the label *Christiani*, or *Chrestiani*, was probably used by Latin-speakers for fervent Judaean nationalists, who had little in common with New Covenant "Christians" other than their belief that Jesus had ascended into Heaven.[19]

Very different explanations for the coinage of the name *Christiani* have been offered. Explaining, for example, how the name may have first been used in Antioch (Acts 11:26) but was coined by Latin-speakers, Paul Trebilco proposed that "Χριστιανός was coined by members of the Roman administration" in that city.[20] These administrators, Trebilco suggested, had to deal with a noisy and unruly collision between observant Judaeans and the early *Christiani*, some of whom were Gentiles and none of whom kept "the Jewish way of life." What I am arguing is that when the name *Christiani* was coined by Latin-speakers—whether in Antioch or in Rome—it was not a name for people who had abandoned the Jewish way of life. It was coined, instead, for fully observant but apocalyptic Judaeans who loudly and disturbingly proclaimed that the Judaean Messiah, *Christos*, was about to return from heaven.

When Nero charged the *Christiani* with being responsible for the great fire that burned almost half of Rome in 64, after rumours had begun to circulate that the emperor himself had planned the fire,[21] the *Christiani* who were rounded up and savagely executed were presumably similar to those whom Claudius had tried to banish from Rome. They were, that is, probably apocalyptic Judaeans who expected that the *Christos*, the Messiah of the Judaean people, would return from heaven to deliver them from the Roman Empire.

Christus is written with a ligature, so it was the manuscript's original scribe who wrote both *Chrestianos* and *Christus*.

19 S. G. F. Brandon argued that "the Palestinian Christians" were nationalists, and he focused especially on the creation of the New Testament after the end of the revolt of 66–70, but he also suggested that Jesus himself may have been a political revolutionary sympathetic to the Zealots (a suggestion that I do not accept). See S. G. F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (London: S.P.C.K., 1951).

20 Paul Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 278.

21 Hansen's "Problem of *Annals* 15.44" does not undermine the historicity of the account. If some of the account was supplied to Tacitus by Pliny the Younger (which I think is possible but not likely), it is still the best account we have of Nero's defence against the rumours that he had planned the fire (on the rumours see note 39, below). At 69–70 Hansen summarises the sources on which Tacitus could have relied in composing *Annales* 15.44: "Aside from Pliny the Younger, we know of no other non-Christian sources prior to Tacitus which he could have relied on. As such, our options are that Tacitus relies either on his known friend, or upon possibly his own investigations." My own guess is that at least some of what Tacitus knew about *Christiani* may have come from the book on the Judaeans (still available late in the second century) written by M. Antonius Julianus, who had governed Judaea from 66 until 70. On Julianus's authorship of such a book see Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 33.4, where Octavius instructs Caecilius to read about the *nequitia* of the Judaeans in the histories written by Josephus, or, if Caecilius prefers something in Latin, to read the book *Antoni Iuliani de Iudaeis*.

As noted above, Tacitus *Annales* 15.44 describes these *Christiani* as hated (*invisos*) by the Roman *vulgus* because of their disgusting behaviour (*per flagitia*).

In order to understand why the Roman *vulgus* hated the early *Christiani* we have to look at the name and the title Χριστός, and what it meant for those Judaeans who were exclaiming it. The reported ascension of Jesus *Nazoraios* presented major problems for the high priest and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Evidently a fair number of Judaeans believed that Jesus *Nazoraios* had ascended into heaven, and those who did so seem to have been called *Nazoraioi*, or *Nazarim*, by the many more (including the high priest and the Sanhedrin) who did not. If I may use some political jargon, I suggest that a few minor problems came to the Judaean leaders from their "left," and much more serious problems came from their "right." On the left was a small group of *Nazoraioi*, who saw Jesus's crucifixion and his reported ascension into heaven as inaugurating a New Covenant, and as ending obligations to follow the Mosaic law. People in this group, which was soon expelled from Jerusalem but was open to Gentiles in the diaspora, we know especially from Acts and the letters of Paul. On the right was a much larger group of *Nazoraioi*, who did not at all see Jesus's crucifixion and reported ascension as an atonement or as a termination of Mosaic law, and this group we know only from a few pagan sources since neither Christian nor Judaean ancient writers (except, perhaps, Josephus) chose to acknowledge them. Closed to Gentiles and fully observant of the laws of Moses (and something of an embarrassment to the author of Acts), this group—a minority, but perhaps a noisy minority among observant Judaeans—looked to the ascended Jesus as the Messiah (*Christos*) of the Judaean people. Although the high priest and the Sanhedrin tolerated this minority they regarded it not only as mistaken but also as dangerous for Judaea, because essential to the group's belief was the expectation that *Christos* would soon come down from heaven, put an end to the Roman Empire, and establish Judaean rule over the world. It was to the most clamorous of this considerable group, who in the diaspora must have been heard calling *Christos* in public places, that Latin-speakers gave the name *Christiani* or *Chrestiani.*

Here we must open the sensitive subjects of Judaean Christianity,[22] Judaean apocalyptic in the post-Hasmonean period, and how the reported resurrection and ascension of Jesus refocused apocalyptic expectations on him. In the 60s those expectations were very high. The disastrous Judaean revolt against Rome broke out in 66, two years after the fire. Although several factors contributed to the revolt, one of the most important

22 Studies of Judaean Christianity have usually focused on the post-temple period, and on the Nazarenes and Ebionites, for whom we have at least a few scraps of information. These studies have rarely dealt either with Nero's execution of *Chrestiani* for the Roman fire of 64 or with Claudius's expulsion of Judaeans from Rome in the 40s because they were causing a disturbance *impulsore Chresto*. These incidents also are not explored in two recent and otherwise helpful books on Judaean Christianity: Annette Y. Reed, *Jewish Christianity and the History of Judaism: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), and Matt Jackson-McCabe, *Jewish Christianity: The Making of the Christianity-Judaism Divide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

appears to have been the expectation of many Judaeans that a prophesied Messiah (in Greek, a *Christos*) was about to come from heaven and establish what would be an eternal Judaean rule over all the world. On apocalyptic expectations our sources on the revolt happen to be agreed. However the War Scroll from Qumran is to be interpreted, both in the *Historiae* of Tacitus and in the *Divus Vespasianus* of Suetonius we are told quite clearly that the Judaeans revolted because they believed in a prophecy that their rule over the world was about to begin.[23] Still more significant is Josephus's statement about the causes of the revolt. The following is Thackeray's translation of Josephus's *Bellum Judaicum* 6.312–13:

> But what more than all else incited them to the war was an ambiguous oracle, likewise found in their sacred scriptures, to the effect that at that time one from their country would become ruler of the world. This they understood to mean someone of their own race, and many of their wise men went astray in their interpretation of it. The oracle, however, in reality signified the sovereignty of Vespasian, who was proclaimed Emperor on Jewish soil.

Josephus famously claimed (*B.J.* 3.399–408) that when he was captured after the fall of Jotapata (Yodefat) he himself had interpreted the oracle to Vespasian. Whatever he actually said to Vespasian probably helped Josephus, who soon became a client of Vespasian and the Flavian *gens*.

The ambiguous oracle (χρησμὸς ἀμφίβολος) to which at least some of Josephus's wise men referred was apparently Dan 7:13–14. The author of this Aramaic section of the book has Daniel dreaming of four dreadful beasts. After the four beasts, however, comes a figure "like a son of man" (*kbar enash*) which is to say, like a man. Here is the English Standard Version of Daniel 7:11–18:

> 11 "I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. 12 As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. 13 "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. 15 "As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. 16 I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of

23 Tacitus, *Historiae* 5.13; Suetonius, *Vespasianus* 4.5. Although Suetonius probably based his account on that of his older contemporary, see Tristan Power, "Suetonius' Tacitus," *Journal of Roman Studies* 104 (2014): 208. That both Latin authors based their accounts on that of Josephus is argued by F. F. Bruce, "Tacitus on Jewish History," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 29 (1984): 42. Another possibility is that they owed something to M. Antonius Julianus's book *de Iudaeis* (see note 21).

> the things. 17 "These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. 18 But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever."

In 7:23–27, still in Aramaic, it is explained to Daniel that the four beasts are not kings but kingdoms, and that the fourth and worst of these (evidently the Seleucid) will trample the whole earth.

From its composition during the reign of Antiochos IV, the pseudepigraphic Daniel was immediately popular. Fragments of eight manuscripts of Daniel were found at Qumran (only Psalms and Exodus exceeded that number), including one evidently dating from the second century BCE. In the centuries that followed the book's composition, the four beasts of Daniel's dream were more clearly interpreted as four kingdoms. In the Septuagint's Daniel 7:17 they are τέσσαρες βασιλεῖαι and in the Vulgate they are *quattuor regna*, and as the fourth book of Hippolytus's *Commentary on Daniel* shows, these kingdoms were imagined to be chronologically consecutive.[24] However, Daniel's "son of man," who followed the four beasts, was taken literally: as a man.

As used by the author of Daniel 7, the Aramaic *kbar enash* meant nothing more than "like a man," distinguishing this fifth and human entity (representing Judaea or Israel) from the four beasts. But so stirring for many Judaeans was Daniel's prophetic dream that *bar enash* was given a definite article, became a title and a much anticipated figure, and was in Greek expressed as ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. As a longed-for deliverer, the Son of Man became interchangeable with *ha-mashiach* (in Greek, ὁ χριστός): the Messiah.[25]

Candidates for the Son of Man, or the Messiah, who would come with the clouds evidently included Enoch, Moses, and Elijah, all of whom were assumed to be in heaven. After 29 or 30 another, and more immediate, possibility was Jesus *Nazoraios*. Crucified on the day before Shabbat during the feast of Pesach, when Jerusalem was

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24 Hippolytus imagined the beasts as the Babylonian, Persian, Greek (i.e., Seleucid), and Roman empires. As suggested by Katharina Bracht, "The Four Kingdoms of Daniel in Hippolytus's *Commentary on Daniel*," in *Four Kingdoms Motif before and beyond the Book of Daniel*, ed. Andrew Perrin, Loren T. Stuckenbruck, Shelby Bennett, and Matthew Hama (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 173–74, although the author of Dan 7 may have considered the Median empire as one of the four beasts, by the end of the first century the Roman Empire had been added as one of the four, and so the Median empire had to be elided into the Persian.

25 The equation is implied at Mark 14:61–2 and Luke 22:67–70. See Bryan McNeil, "The Son of Man and the Messiah: A Footnote," *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 419–21. John J. Collins, after reviewing the terms in the Similitudes of Enoch and 4th Ezra, concluded: "The title messiah has only minor importance in the Similitudes, but the fact that it is still used there shows that it must have been commonly associated with the Danielic 'son of Man'. This again is in accordance with the prevalent interpretation in early Jewish tradition." See John J. Collins, "The Son of Man in First Century Judaism," *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 465. For a survey of the voluminous scholarship on the Son of Man, or *der Menschensohn*, see Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

teeming with several hundred thousand pilgrims, he was identified on the titulus of his cross as "king of the Judaeans." During a pilgrim feast a funeral cortege for a crucified "king of the Judaeans" would have been uncontrollable and riotous, but there was no funeral cortege. On the morning following Shabbat, at the empty tomb in which Jesus's body was supposed to have been temporarily placed, one or two young men announced that he had arisen and was returning to Galilee, where his followers should find him. He was not publicly seen in Galilee, but within a few weeks reports began to circulate that he had ascended into heaven. As those reports took hold, he became for believers the Son of Man, or the Messiah, ὁ χριστός, who would come back from heaven and give to the holy people an eternal kingdom over all the world.[26]

In the decades after his reported ascension many Judaeans, although certainly not the high priest and others in the Judaean leadership, apparently referred to Jesus simply as Χριστός, treating the title ("Messiah") as a proper name. Although there continued to be other candidates for the titles of Messiah and Son of Man, the titles seem to have been applied especially to Jesus *Nazoraios*. So Matthew 1:16 identifies Jesus, son of Mary, simply as ὁ λεγόμενος χριστός. That Jesus was Χριστός in the middle decades of the first century is assumed in the letters of Paul.[27] Although Paul often referred to Jesus as Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, he otherwise used only the name Χριστός. Although most Judaeans are not likely to have done so, those who called Jesus Χριστός must have been numerous enough to have made the reference common knowledge. The Romans' pejorative *Christiani* probably came into currency not much later than did the Judaeans' *Christos*.

The identity of Jesus as the Messiah and as the Son of Man was central to the sources of Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels. A remnant of this excitement in Judaea is the infancy narrative now at Luke 1–2.[28] The angel Gabriel tells Mary (Luke 1:32–33) that the Lord God will give to the son to be born from her womb the throne of his father David: he will rule over the House of Jacob forever, and of his reign there will be no end. And at Luke 2:10–11 an angel announces Jesus's birth to the shepherds, bringing good news for "the entire people (παντὶ τῷ λαῷ) that this day in the city of David is born for you a σωτήρ who is χριστὸς κύριος." Another remnant is the title, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, which appears 82 times in the New Testament Gospels. It is Jesus himself

26 Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: New Press, 2012), argued that Jesus applied the Son of Man title to himself, claiming that he was the Son of Man prophesied by Daniel. That is unlikely. The title could have been applied to Jesus, I think, only after reports of his ascension began to circulate.

27 For Paul, the "apostle to the Gentiles," the title or name *Christos* of course had few of the nationalist connotations that it had for other Judaeans. See Matthew Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

28 On the original Semitic language of these chapters see Stephen Farris, *The Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives: Their Origin, Meaning and Significance* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1985). For the chapters' relevance to the Dan 7 prophecy see René Laurentin, *Structure et Théologie de Luc. I–II* (Paris: Gabalda, 1964), 43–48.

who is made to speak of "the Son of Man," and to imply that the title belongs to him. At Matthew 16:13–14 Jesus asks his disciples who people think that the Son of Man will be. They answer that some think that the Son of Man will be John the Baptist, others Elijah, or Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

> **15** He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" **16** Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." **17** And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. (English Standard Version)

Still another remnant of Judaean enthusiasm for *Christos* during the middle decades of the first century may well have been, in the post-temple period of ancient Judaism, the "heresy" of the Ebionites and Nazarenes.

When did a significant number of Judaeans begin to call Jesus Χριστός, "Messiah"? Belief that Jesus was the Son of Man, and so Χριστός, could hardly have begun until reports began to circulate of his ascension into heaven, but it probably began not much later. The author of Acts told his readers (2:38–41) that by the pilgrim feast of Shavuot, seven weeks after Jesus's crucifixion, excitement about him had spread widely enough that some 3 000 people were baptised "upon the name of Jesus *Christos*" (ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) and the *ekklesia* of Jesus *Christos* was formed at the Jerusalem temple.[29] And that not much later the number of men who believed grew to about 5 000 (Acts 4:4), after Peter and John preached to the crowd about the resurrected and ascended Jesus. However the Acts story is regarded, it is not surprising that many Judaeans would have been electrified to hear that the crucified "king of the Judaeans" had arisen from the tomb, ascended into heaven, and was now Χριστός, Messiah.

The extent and importance of this enthusiasm for *Christos* (we cannot call it "Christianity" unless we qualify it drastically) among Judaeans during the years from 30 to 70 are greatly underestimated or even completely ignored in histories of Judaism and of Christianity. It has been argued, for example, that very few Judaeans believed that Jesus was Χριστός. Among Keith Hopkins's distinguished sociological studies of the Greco-Roman world was an exploration of early Christian numbers. Assuming that the pertinent passages in Acts are not to be taken seriously, Hopkins's study of Christian

29 For scepticism see Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 126: "The staggering number of Luke's recruits, however, seems conjured for rhetorical effect: he wants to present a thriving movement miraculously growing from strength to strength. (So too at Acts 4.4: five thousand sign on.)." But it is not unlikely that in first-century Judaea a great many people—thousands of them—would have been excited by an empty tomb, announcement of a resurrection, and reports of an ascension into heaven by a "king of the Judaeans" reputed to have been a miracle-worker.

numbers, including both Judaeans and non-Judaeans, came up with a very small figure:[30]

> One tentative but radical conclusion is that Christianity was for a century after Jesus' death the intellectual property at any one time of scarcely a few dozen, perhaps rising to two hundred, literate adult males, dispersed throughout the Mediterranean basin.

Not until the third and fourth centuries, Hopkins concluded, did Christians become first a sizeable and then a large part of the basin's population. David Sim, accepting much of Hopkins's study and calculating the extent of "the Christian movement" among Judaeans, concluded that the number of Judaeans in the movement, both in Judaea and in the Diaspora, never rose much above one sixtieth of one per cent:[31]

> One can only conclude that the Christian mission to the Jews was a dismal failure (Jervell 1984:26). Just how unsuccessful it was is revealed by the following figure. If at best the Christian movement contained only 1000 members of Jewish origin at any point in time, then this represented a mere 0.0166 per cent of the total Jewish population in antiquity, working on the accepted figure of six million Jews (or 10 per cent of the ancient world) in the first century (McKnight 1993:11).

Sim assumed that in the Diaspora the "Jewish Christians" had been expelled from Rome by Claudius, and that the *Christiani* executed by Nero were therefore Gentiles rather than Judaeans.[32]

These conclusions are wrong, I am arguing, because they overlook the apocalyptic nationalism that the Roman term *Christiani* implies. The original *Christiani*, and those whom Nero executed, were not New Covenant converts but were observant Judaeans to whom Latin-speakers had given the derogatory name *Christiani* because (in a voice loud enough to annoy Latin-speakers in their city) they proclaimed Jesus as their *Christos*, Messiah, who would come back to earth, shatter the Roman Empire, and establish a Judaean kingdom over all the world. Perhaps the *Christiani* themselves were not very numerous. But behind them in Judaea and throughout the diaspora were many—many thousands—more who shared the beliefs, although not the conduct, of the *Christiani*.

For the high priest, the Sanhedrin and other Judaeans who were aware of the immense power available to Tiberius and later emperors, the apocalyptic enthusiasm of a large crowd was regarded as a deadly danger, and they did their best to defuse it. Although

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30 Keith Hopkins, "Christian Number and its Implications," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 185.

31 David Sim, "How Many Jews Became Christians in the First Century? The Failure of the Christian Mission to the Jews," *HTS Theological Studies* 61 (2005): 437.

32 Sim, 431–42: "The Christian community persecuted by Nero in 64 must have been overwhelmingly Gentile because it was presumably much easier to distinguish the Christians from local Jewish groups than it had been in the time of Claudius."

Herodes Agrippa, on his appointment as king of Judaea in 41, confronted the *ekklesia* and ordered the death of James, son of Zebedee (Acts 12:1–2), the fervour for Christos remained high. In the late 50s, when Paul made his last visit to Jerusalem, evidently for one of the pilgrim feasts, he is said to have met with James, brother of Jesus and head of the *ekklesia* of *Iesous Christos*. The author of Acts presents James and the elders, who disagreed with Paul's discarding of the Judaean law, telling him to look and see "how many tens of thousands" (πόσαι μυριάδες) among the Judaeans were believers but were faithful in upholding the *nomos* (Acts 21:20).[33] If in fact by the late 50s tens of thousands of Judaeans believed that Jesus was the Messiah, we would have to conclude that although most Judaeans did not, those who did were a very visible and important minority. However many there were, apparently both in Judaea and in the diaspora these were fully observant Judaeans, and considered themselves as such, but had added the belief that *Christos* was about to return from heaven and establish a permanent Judaean empire over all the world.

In 62 James along with several others was stoned to death, on the order of the Sanhedrin, which had been convoked by Ananos the high priest. The order was denounced in Judaea and quickly cost Ananos his position. According to Josephus, *A.J.* 20.200, Ananos arrested James (*Iakobos*), τὸν ἀδελφὸν Ἰησοῦ τοῦ λεγομένου Χριστοῦ. It is difficult to explain such an order except that James the Just was then encouraging, as the authorities were trying to discourage, enthusiasm for Jesus as *Christos* and the Son of Man. Also of possible relevance is the *Testimonium Flavianum*, often discounted by those who doubt that in the decades between Jesus's reported ascension and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple many Judaeans regarded him as the Messiah and referred to him as *Christos*. In the 90s Josephus seems to have written that Jesus was (not is!) the *Christos* and to have implied that the Χριστιανοί, named after him, once were much more numerous than they had become when he was writing. According to *A.J.* 18.63–64, the *Testimonium Flavianum* on Jesus, "the tribe of the Christiani, named after him, has even now not died out" (εἰς ἔτι τε νῦν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἀπὸ τοῦδε ὠνομασμένων οὐκ ἐπέλιπε τὸ φῦλον). If Josephus did indeed write the *Testimoniun Flavianum*, the label *Christiani* (and *Christianoi* in Greek) had long before the 90s been attached to Judaeans who regarded Jesus as *Christos*.

However that may be, the *A.J.* 20.200 passage identifying James as τὸν ἀδελφὸν Ἰησοῦ τοῦ λεγομένου Χριστοῦ is yet more evidence that among many Judaeans Jesus had been known simply as *Christos*. Because the tag *Christiani* (or the more familiar *Chrestiani*) was coined by Latin-speakers, it presumably happened in cities of the diaspora, where Latin-speakers heard Judaeans boldly proclaiming their belief in *Christos* and his imminent return from heaven. If the name *Christiani* was first heard in Antioch perhaps it was coined by Romans employed there in the late 30s, for Judaean believers in

33 Most versions of the New Testament, beginning with the Authorized Version of King James, render the μυριάδες as "thousands," but the Greek words are not πόσαι χιλιάδες but πόσαι μυριάδες. This has been called Lucan hyperbole, but it is the text we have.

Christos who were furious that a statue of Caligula was being fashioned, under the supervision of the governor of Syria, Publius Petronius, for placement in the Jerusalem temple (or, conversely, in 41 for believers in *Christos* who were exuberant on hearing the news that Caligula had been assassinated). As discussed above, during the principate of Claudius (41–54) the title *Christos* must often have disturbed people living in Rome, and the same seems to have been true in the years before the great fire that devastated Rome in 64. There is good reason to think that the name *Christiani* (or *Chrestiani*) was used by the Roman *vulgus* already in the 40s, and that Tacitus's *Annales* 15.44 does not include an anachronism: in the middle of the first century there were at Rome people called *Christiani*, and they had nothing to do with the New Covenant. There is good reason, that is, to discard the traditional assumption that the name *Christiani* was coined by Romans for "Christians" whom the New Covenant had freed from circumcision, from avoiding "unclean" foods, and from limits on activities during the Sabbath: the *Christiani* whom first-century Romans named and hated were fully observant but raucously defiant Judaeans. And on the basis of the clear statements by Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius that the Judaean revolt of 66–70 broke out because of belief in a prophecy that Judaean rule over the world was about to begin, we must suppose that the *Christiani*—fervent believers in the ascended *Christos*—were among the prime movers of that revolt.

Certainly there were other fervent believers. Josephus mentioned at least five "sign prophets" who lived in the last decades of the Second Temple period, and each of them had a large popular following.[34] The readiness of the common people in first-century Judaea to follow a charismatic figure is well documented. But it was to Jesus *Nazoraios* that the title, Messiah, was widely given, and from whom most was expected.

In that connection, finally, we ought also to note what the *Chronica* of Sulpicius Severus had to say about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. We are well aware that Josephus, comfortable both as a Judaean and as a Flavian, went to great lengths to convince his readers that Titus had no intention to destroy the temple: the destruction was entirely accidental. Sulpicius, however, writing 331 years after the temple was destroyed, tells a very different story and was apparently following a subsequently lost section of Tacitus's *Historiae*.[35] According to this section of the *Chronica*, often regarded as a fragment of the *Historiae*, Titus convoked a council to decide whether or not to destroy the temple, the grandeur of which surpassed all mortal accomplishments. Some in the council urged that the temple should be preserved, so to preserve the Romans' reputation for moderation. Titus, however, urged the destruction of the temple,

34 See Rebecca Gray, *Prophetic Figures in Late Second Temple Jewish Palestine: The Evidence from Josephus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 113.

35 Sulpicius Severus *Chronica* 2.30. Hugh Montefiore, "Sulpicius Severus and Titus' Council of War," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 11 (1962): 156–70, argued that Sulpicius owed more to Marcus Antonius Julianus, who actually participated in Titus's *consilium* (see above, n. 21), than to Tacitus. But the Latin of the passage is remarkably Tacitean.

quo plenius Iudaeorum et Christianorum religio tolleretur. If in fact the council in late summer of 70 planned to eradicate the *religio Christianorum*, then both the name and the behaviour of the *Christiani* must have been quite familiar to the councillors.

It is quite clear that Nero rounded up and executed *Christiani* in Rome. For that we have not only Tacitus's long account but also a line by Suetonius.[36] Because *Christiani* were by definition apocalyptic Judaeans, who believed that Judaean rule over the world was about to begin, it was sufficient to identify persons as *Christiani* to conclude that they looked forward to the destruction of the Roman Empire. Tertullian's *institutum Neronianum* (at *Ad Nationes* 1.7) was undoubtedly correct, although Tertullian was not aware that the *Christiani* of his own time were quite different from the *Christiani* of Nero's time. It is true that we do not know how Nero went about making it a crime to be a *Christianus*. Perhaps he did this through a *constitutio* or an *edictum*, or perhaps he even had a *senatus consultum* passed to that effect. But it may also have been simply that his action became a precedent for Trajan's rescript to Pliny and for later emperors.[37] However it was done, the distinction was made between ordinary Judaeans, whose religion was a *religio licita*, and the dangerous *Christiani*, who could be sentenced to death. It is not surprising that toward the end of the first century or early in the second everyone in Asia Minor who had been converted to the New Covenant was wary of being called a *Christianus* (1 Peter 4:16) and was advised to take care (1 Peter 2:17) to honour the emperor (τὸν βασιλέα).

After the calamitous end of the Judaean revolt, and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the Tannaitic schools insisted that Jesus was not the Messiah, and the Judaean *Christiani* shrivelled in numbers. By the reign of Trajan the name was beginning to be accepted by followers of the New Covenant "way."[38] And with the name came also the danger of being arrested, and the sporadic persecutions over the next 200 years. But until 70, the *Christiani* (or *Chrestiani*) were apocalyptic and clamorous Judaeans. Some

36 According to Suetonius, *Nero* 16, *afflicti suppliciis Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae et maleficae.* Suetonius included this as one of Nero's few commendable actions, squeezing it in between Nero's order that the food cooked in *popinae* be limited to legumes and other vegetables, and Nero's attempt to end chariot racers' misbehaviour on the streets of Rome.

37 Trajan may have had some family recollection of *Christiani*. It will be recalled that Trajan's father had led the Tenth Legion of Vespasian's army in Judaea in 67–68.

38 In their appendix tracing the acceptance of the name among New Covenant Christians, Van der Lans and Bremmer, "Tacitus and the Persecution of the Christians," 317, believe that the name was rarely used by New Covenant Christians themselves until after the Decian persecution in the third century: "It was only during the persecution following the decree that the term Christian would come to everybody's attention and be adopted by the followers of Jesus in defiance of the Roman government."

of these Judaean *Chrestian*i were executed by Nero on the charge that they were responsible for the fire that in 64 had burned much of Rome.[39]

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39 The execution would probably have occurred in the early months of 68, when the Judaean revolt was well under way. Eusebius and Jerome place Nero's execution of "the Christians," including Peter and Paul, in 68. Although most scholars regard that as "an error" (see Timothy Barnes, "Legislation against the Christians," *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 [1968], n. 37): Tacitus says that Nero charged the *Chrestiani* with starting the fire in order to deflect rumours that it was his doing. Such preposterous rumours could hardly have begun until the *vulgus* in Rome saw how splendid the Domus Aurea and the grounds that surrounded it were, which Nero ordered to be spread over the burned-out slopes of the Esquiline, Caelian, and Palatine hills. On the Domus Aurea see Larry Ball, *The Domus Aurea and the Roman Architectural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Construction of the palace and creation of the palatial grounds took place in 66 and 67, during most of which time Nero was touring and singing in Greece. At the dire warnings of Helius, the freedman whom he had left in Rome to govern during his absence, Nero seems to have returned to Rome at the very end of the sailing season in 67. See Gerhard Schumann, *Hellenistische und griechische Elemente in der Regierung Neros* (Leipzig: Schwarzenberg & Schumann, 1930), 67, and Keith Bradley, "The Chronology of Nero's Visit to Greece A.D. 66/67," *Latomus* 37 (1978): 61–72. At p. 71 Bradley concluded, "In all likelihood, therefore, Nero left Greece no later than 1st December, 67 after an absence from Rome of some sixteen months."

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